

Congress of the United States
Washington, D.C. 20515

May 5, 2020

Speaker Nancy Pelosi
U.S. House of Representatives
H-232, United States Capitol
Washington, DC 20515

Minority Leader Kevin McCarthy
U.S. House of Representatives
H-204, United States Capitol
Washington, D.C. 20515

Dear Speaker Pelosi and Minority Leader McCarthy:

In response to the declaration of a national state of emergency over the COVID-19 pandemic, U.S. Citizenship and Immigration Services (USCIS) canceled naturalization oath ceremonies and other in person services across the country from March 18 until at least June 4.¹ Such ceremonies allow individuals to take the oath of allegiance—the final step in the naturalization process—and become U.S. citizens. Currently, USCIS interprets existing law to require naturalization applicants to take the required oath in person.²

Prior to the pandemic, USCIS naturalized an average 66,000 individuals per month. Currently, more than one hundred thousand aspiring citizens have had their naturalization applications approved, but cannot complete the final step to becoming a citizen without risking exposure to COVID-19. Given the uncertain nature of the pandemic, it is unclear when in-person naturalization oath ceremonies can resume and whether USCIS will be able to reschedule these ceremonies in a timely fashion when it is safe to do so. As you consider the next COVID-19 relief package, we therefore urge you to include a provision that empowers USCIS to conduct secure remote naturalization oath ceremonies.

We ask that the next COVID-19 supplemental require that USCIS provide remote oath ceremonies during this pandemic and any future declared national emergency that impedes the regular administration of naturalization ceremonies and as a future option for individuals who have applied for naturalization. To hold a virtual naturalization ceremony, an applicant would elect to take the virtual oath of allegiance via videoconferencing technology, over the phone, or by signing and submitting a form. As a fee-funded agency, USCIS would not require any new discretionary funding to implement this directive; the agency raises hundreds of millions of dollars annually in fees, including fees from premium application processing, which are earmarked for “infrastructure improvements in the adjudications and customer-service processes.”³

¹ USCIS Response to COVID-19, <https://www.uscis.gov/about-us/uscis-response-covid-19>

² 8 U.S.C. § 1447; 8 C.F.R. § 337

³ See 8 USC §1356(m),(n), and (u).

Such a capability would provide long-term flexibility to the agency far beyond the duration of the pandemic. For example, remote naturalization ceremonies would allow the swearing in of special populations such as military service members deployed abroad or individuals with disabilities for whom travel to a large group ceremony location may be difficult. In the long run, virtual oath ceremonies also could save USCIS much-needed resources by lessening necessary expenditures for large-scale ceremonies for those individuals who opt to do a remote ceremony and help USCIS process its massive backlog of approved applicants for naturalization who only need to take the oath.

Naturalization of new U.S. citizens is good not only for the individual, but for the nation as well. The completion of the naturalization process would immediately provide many constituents with access to critical medical and financial assistance to help weather this disruptive and devastating pandemic. Beyond this, naturalized citizens earn 44% more in annual employment income than their immigrant counterparts; income which contributes to the economic success of our communities, including through increased tax revenue which will be even more critical in the coming years.

In mandating virtual oath ceremonies, USCIS could immediately complete the naturalization of more than one hundred thousand individuals, leading to numerous social and economic benefits. With increased access to civic and economic opportunities, naturalized citizens make us a stronger and more resilient nation. Now more than ever, we must do everything we can to support those who are mere steps away from obtaining citizenship, particularly as we look towards the future. We thank you for your consideration of this provision for the next COVID-19 supplemental.

Sincerely,



Norma J. Torres



J. Luis Correa



Adriano Espaillat

Additional Signatories

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Earl Blumenauer
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